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ELISION IN LATIN AND GREEK

In Four Parts—Part III

BY H W MAGOUN

In English, we sometimes write such combinations as "the horse" and "the apple" with an apostrophe in place of the final vowel of the article; but no one ever thinks of pronouncing "th' horse" as *thorse* or "th' apple" as *thapple*. And yet that is precisely the sort of thing that we do in Greek. In English, each syllable keeps its identity and each is clearly recognized by the ear. Why should not the same be true in Greek, as, for example, in θ' *ἄμα*, quoted above? Is not such a treatment natural? Are there good and sufficient reasons for supposing that ancient Greek (modern Greek is a different thing) resembled modern French in this matter rather than English or German, which shows a similar obscure final *e*?

What really happens to the -e in English "the"? It cannot be said that it is pronounced; and yet it is not dropped. It is plainly and decidedly obscured,—or is it elided? The form "th'", which is but an attempt to represent more accurately the pronunciation actually used in colloquial speech, is going out of use; for the colloquial pronunciation is now taught in the schools. The definite article, however, still remains a distinct word, in fact, even in poetry, although the theory of scansion makes the assumption necessary that it is a part of the following syllable. But if it remains a distinct word at all, it must contain a vowel fragment, if nothing more. The sound actually used with the th- is not usually recognized as a vowel; but neither are the l- and r-vowel sounds, which unquestionably exist in the language as it is spoken, generally recognized as such in English.

No one can deny that English colloquial "the" has a colorless sound of some sort following the th-. What is it? Is it not a color-

less vowel, a sort of *Schwa indogermanicum*, which may well represent the result of elision? Can Latin *elisio*, properly understood, mean the complete destruction, or dropping, of a vowel sound? The prefix -e does not mean 'off', but 'out'. It is not a 'bruising off', then, but a 'bruising out', or a 'bruising out of' (shape). To assume that it means 'an injury caused by striking out' is to miss the true sense of the word; for the prefix cannot modify the involved idea of 'striking'. What it does do, is to intensify the idea of injury. But can the sign called an ἀπόστροφος indicate, from the meaning of the term, a true dropping of the vowel which it replaces? Is the full expression, ἀπόστροφος προσῳδία, 'turned away tone', 'turned away accent', to be taken as referring primarily to the form of the sign used? Has it no deeper significance? Was the symbol named first, or did it take its name from the phenomenon which it was used to indicate? Is not the latter the natural process?

In my own experience, a change of the kind here advocated, removed a large part of the well known difficulty of reading Greek verse naturally and at the same time metrically, although it seemed at the start as though the theory, in actual practice, would not work. I began with the well known lines: θάμβησεν δ' Ἀχιλῆς, μετὰ δ' ἐτράπετ', αὐτίκα δ' ἔγνω Παλλὰδ' Ἀθηναίην· δεινὸν δέ οἱ ὅσσοι φάανθεν. Hom II I 199 f. They contain a sufficient number of instances to test the theory fairly well; for it is not often that four such cases of elision occur in a single line. After a few vain attempts, I mastered the process, sounding the elided vowels like the obscure -e of English colloquial "the"; and, to my amazement, the lines, which had never before struck me as anything remarkable, became not merely metrical, when read as the sense demands, but they even seemed wonderfully suggestive of the mental state of Achilles. I have tried the same process on many passages since and always with satisfactory results, in both prose and poetry.

The lines, as read, departed from the regular metrical scheme; but the changes made were amply provided for by the native grammarians, who not only recognize other feet than dactyls and spondees in the hexameter but also men-

